

BOOK REVIEWS

Jordan Daniel Wood, *The Whole Mystery of Christ: Creation as Incarnation in Maximus Confessor*

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Andrew J. Summerson

Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, ON, Canada (andrew.summerson@utoronto.ca)

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* is loosely based on his own experience as a U.S. soldier caught on the wrong side of the front of the Dresden bombing. After fits and starts of trying to write about it, Vonnegut settled on a mix of memoir and novel, which begins, 'All of this happened, more or less.' The unreliable narrator follows Billy Pilgrim and jostles the reader backward and forward through time, space, and genre without warning. The sparse prose examines tragedy and metaphysical puzzles throughout. Only at the end one looks behind and sees the devastation: free will is a sham, morality is ambiguous at best and arbitrary at worst, and Christianity can no more inspire holocausts than heroism. Before this dim fatalism, a listless sigh of resignation replays throughout: 'so it goes'.

From its publication to today, Vonnegut's work has elicited both accolades and acrimony, serving as an aesthetic exploration of the trauma of war as well as a lightning rod for literary censorship. Jordan Daniel Wood's first monograph, a revision of his doctoral thesis, has evoked similar sets of reactions. To his credit, these responses are hardly lukewarm. Its own endorsements on the back cover speak of his 'ingeniously original interpretation' (David Bentley Hart) and affirms that the book 'offers a new paradigm for Maximus scholarship' (Hans Boersma). At the time of the publication of this review, already several journals will have featured articles criticising his thesis, both its metaphysical particulars and the logical consequences.¹

My questions concern method. Wood presses one phrase of the Confessor's into the form of a thesis statement: 'The Word of God, very God, wills that the mystery of his Incarnation be actualized always and in all things' (*Ambiguum* 7.22, trans. Wood). First, the rarefication of a phrase into an axiom risks assertion rather than argument. Just as Vonnegut's 'so it goes' punctuates his vivid descriptions of the atrocities of war, it also puts a stop to any healthy theodicy that might lead one beyond nihilism. Wood's thesis dares a rhetorically similar move by short circuiting contrary considerations through the repetition of a thesis that Maximus, in his marvelously speculative manner, may or may not have held on to as tightly as in Wood's presentation.

Wood's key claim shifts the incarnation as the *telos* to which everything tends to the *archē* that explains the origin of all things and creation itself. If creation is *de facto*

¹See e.g. Jonathan Bieler, 'Creation as Incarnation? Critical Objections to a Recent Thesis on Maximus the Confessor', *Modern Theology*, early access (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12861>; James Dominic Rooney, 'The Ends of the Divine: Hart and Wood on Grace', *Nova et Vetera*, forthcoming.

incarnation, this reduces the *kerygma* to metaphysics, and Christ's call to repentance differs little from Neoplatonic *epistrophē*. Telling is the role asceticism plays in his account: it has none. In his short discussion of the sacraments, Wood recalls that for Maximus the 'power implanted or nascent in baptism must be nursed to fullness by a person's own deeds' (p. 98, cf. *Ad Thalassium* 6). In the following sentence, he supplies the eucharist as the primary effective deed. Wood's leap leaves behind Maximus' argument. To dwell on *Ad Thalassium* 6 further reveals that the effects of the sacramental life are most fully received, not simply through deeds but *praxis*, a shorthand for the ascetic life: 'through *praxis* the mystical water effects the cleansing of the conscience' (*Ad Thalassium* 6; CCSG 7:71). Turning to Maximus' *Mystagogy*, certainly the culmination of the liturgy is the unity between God and man achieved in the eucharist. However, an ascetic itinerary precedes this goal, as evidenced by Maximus's interpretation of the entrance into the church: it is both a conversion 'of the faithless to the knowledge of God' and a course correction away from a 'shameful life' wrought by repentance (*Mystagogy* 9; CCSG 69:38). Relaxing the literal reading of *Ambiguum* 7.22 reveals this essential feature of the Christian life hidden between Wood's artisanally crafted sentences.

Wood, not unlike Vonnegut, moves the reader backward and forward in time, at times knowingly, at times unknowingly. In his preface, Wood describes the work as 'historical theology'. By historical, he refers to certain practices: word studies, intertextual connections between late-antique authors, and so forth. But he asserts that distinct from historians, who seek to understand texts, the domain of systematic theology seeks to understand objects. Hence, Wood prioritises: 'I seek also the truth he [Maximus] means. Historical Theology cannot limit itself to simple repetition or observation... Theology seeks revealed truth. And divine truth' (p. xvi). Wood wishes to obviate the distinction between 'historical theology' (what it means then) and 'systematic theology' (what it means now). There is nothing wrong with mending this cleavage in contemporary scholarship. Yet Wood's systematic theology in historical dress blinds the reader to the time machine he puts us through. As a work of historical theology, readers will profit much from engaging in agreement and disagreement with Wood's interpretation of Maximus's metaphysics against Plotinus, Proclus and Dionysius, whom he explicates in order to put in relief what he claims to be the Maximian difference. Wood is less overt in laying out the systematic and contemporary *topoi* against which he is at odds. They are simply laid to waste paralytically. Anxiety about nature and grace rides below the surface and the dismissal of any 'two-tiered system' pops up only in asides. Two-tiered Thomists are made to 'blush' before Maximus the Confessor's supposedly contrary and more intellectually satisfying account (pp. 105–06). At one point he reduces the idea of pure nature to a result of original sin: 'Adam makes of himself a false beginning by reducing creation to pure nature' (p. 175). The Thomistic metaphysics he wishes to subvert deserve to be laid out at least as clearly as the treatment of Neo-Chalcedonian Christology and Neoplatonic causality that he attempts elsewhere, lest we begin to question the reliability of the narrator to lead us to truth that his systematic method intends.

Wood's creative portrayal of the Confessor unsettles classical Christian accounts of *creatio ex nihilo*, necessary and contingent being, and trinitarian theology. Hence, caution must be taken to read Maximus in light of a tradition that he sought to defend. Wood's book demands a critical read, and scholars can profit much, so long as they do not consign themselves to the resignation, 'so it goes', mistaking some of Wood's more avant-garde views for those of the Confessor.